

"Boots on the Ground:" A Lesson Relearned?

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Class of 2013

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</p>					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) xx-03-2013		2. REPORT TYPE STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE "Boots on the Ground:" A Lesson Relearned?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Price United States Air Force				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Colonel Joseph C. Dill Department of Command, Leadership, and Management				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Word Count: 7,311					
14. ABSTRACT America's recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq have soured Americans against deploying U.S. troops in foreign counterinsurgencies. However, as a globally engaged superpower, the United States will likely be forced to deal with insurgencies in the future. Instead of putting U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in a counterinsurgency, a better method is building the partnership capacity of the host nation. The small U.S. military footprint in the Colombian counterinsurgency from 2002 to present is a perfect example of how to accomplish this. This paper will compare the effect of U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in the Iraqi counterinsurgency to the lack of U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in the Colombian counterinsurgency. The results will clearly indicate that U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in a counterinsurgency should only be used as a last resort.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Plan Colombia, Counterinsurgency, Iraqi Counterinsurgency, Insurgency, Building Partnership Capacity					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 40	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UU	b. ABSTRACT UU	c. THIS PAGE UU			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**“Boots on the Ground:”
A Lesson Relearned?**

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Report Date: March 2013

Page Count: 40

Word Count: 7,311

Key Terms: Plan Colombia, Counterinsurgency, Iraqi Counterinsurgency,
Insurgency, Building Partnership Capacity

Classification: Unclassified

America's recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq have soured Americans against deploying U.S. troops in foreign counterinsurgencies. However, as a globally engaged superpower, the United States will likely be forced to deal with insurgencies in the future. Instead of putting U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in a counterinsurgency, a better method is building the partnership capacity of the host nation. The small U.S. military footprint in the Colombian counterinsurgency from 2002 to present is a perfect example of how to accomplish this. This paper will compare the effect of U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in the Iraqi counterinsurgency to the lack of U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in the Colombian counterinsurgency. The results will clearly indicate that U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in a counterinsurgency should only be used as a last resort.

“Boots on the Ground:” A Lesson Relearned?

The huge cost in U.S. lives and money caused by the U.S. involvement in the Iraqi insurgency have caused many, including President Obama to conclude that we did not use our military wisely and should not do this again.¹ The costs of putting U.S. “Boots on the Ground” in a foreign counterinsurgency (COIN) are too high while the chances for success are too low. This is the same lesson learned from Vietnam yet it did not preclude the United States from deploying large quantities of troops to combat the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.²

This leads us to ask two questions. Is the United States destined to continue to be involved in counterinsurgencies in the future? If so, is there a better way of dealing with a foreign counterinsurgency than putting U.S. “Boots on the Ground”?

It is unlikely that the United States will have a choice but to involve itself in COIN operations in the future.³ As the self-appointed ‘Policeman of the World’ with a large forward presence, the United States military is globally engaged on a scale unheard of prior to World War II. With the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 90s, the United States has an overwhelming superiority of nuclear and conventional forces “which has driven almost all potential opponents to embrace terrorism and insurgency as their only viable theory for victory.”⁴ Therefore, unless the United States changes its approach and withdraws from its role as “Policeman of the World,” it is likely to be involved in future counterinsurgency operations in one form or another.

This brings us to the second question. Is there a better way of dealing with a foreign counterinsurgency than putting U.S. “Boots on the Ground”? The answer is emphatically “Yes.” “Boots on the Ground” should only be used if no other options are

available. The full spectrum of options to include diplomatic, informational, military and economic should be explored before committing U.S. troops. If military assistance is required, the preferred method of dealing with a counterinsurgency is by building the partnership capacity (BPC) of the host nation (HN).

The United States' involvement in the Colombian counterinsurgency from 2002 to the present is a superb example of BPC in a COIN campaign. Instead of sending large quantities of troops to Colombia, the United States provided equipment, training and intelligence that helped the Colombians fill in the gaps in their counterinsurgency capabilities. This has brought Colombia from the brink of failure in 2002 to one of the most stable countries in the region today. Colombia has also become a strong ally and economic partner with the United States. In contrast, the United States had tens of thousands of U.S. troops fighting the counterinsurgency in Iraq for over eight years. The results of this counterinsurgency are much more dubious. This paper will compare the involvement of the United States in the Colombian counterinsurgency to that in the Iraqi counterinsurgency. Specifically, it will look at the overall effect of having U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in Iraq compared to BPC in Colombia without U.S. "Boots on the Ground."

The results will speak for themselves and emphatically proclaim that U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in a foreign counterinsurgency is fraught with problems and should be avoided if at all possible in favor of building the partnership capacity of the host nation. Although U.S. "Boots on the Ground" can provide tactical and operational advantages that help to stabilize a counterinsurgency, the risks and disadvantages will almost always outweigh the benefits. "Boots on the Ground" will cost more in U.S. lives, wealth

and prestige and usually ends up being a detriment to the long-term success of the COIN campaign.

Before continuing, it is important to define “Boots on the Ground.” For the purpose of this paper, “Boots on the Ground” refers to large quantities of U.S. troops on foreign soil directly engaged in COIN operations. It does not refer to U.S. troops engaged in BPC activities such as training and advising HN troops.

Colombian Counterinsurgency

The Colombian insurgency is very complex with multiple insurgent groups fighting the Colombian government for various reasons. On top of this, paramilitary groups and drug cartels have dramatically added to the general violence in Colombia. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of all the groups and their reasons for fighting. However, a short history of the Colombian insurgency and counterinsurgency will give the reader a feeling for the mess that the new Colombian President, Alvaro Uribe, inherited in 2002.

The Colombian insurgency traces its roots to the class conflict that erupted in 1948 and lasted until 1964. Over 200,000 Colombians lost their lives in this conflict.⁵ The unresolved issues from this conflict led to the formation of several insurgent groups in the 1960s and 1970s. By far the largest and most powerful of these insurgent groups was the Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In 1981, there was an attempt by the Colombian President, Julio Turbay, to end the insurrection and amnesty was offered to all insurgents. This temporarily worked until the leader of the newly formed FARC political party, Union Patriótica (UP), was assassinated. This directly led to the rearming of the insurgent groups by 1983.⁶

After rearming, the FARC turned to drug trafficking to finance its operations. At the same time drug cartels were rapidly expanding in Colombia and a general lawlessness permeated Colombian society. In response, in 1987 the first of many paramilitary groups was formed and backed by wealthy Colombians to combat the influence of the leftist insurgents and drug cartels. However, the paramilitary groups soon turned to drugs to finance their operations as well.⁷ The paramilitaries formed the infamous death squads that eradicated civilians suspected of supporting the left wing insurgents. In the 1988 mayoral elections alone, 600 UP members were assassinated, including 16 mayoral candidates.⁸

By 1998 the President of Colombia, Andres Pastrana, decided he needed to try and get the FARC, the largest threat to the Colombian government, to the negotiating table to end the violence. He gave the FARC a demilitarized zone of approximately one third of the country in which they would not be harassed while negotiations took place.⁹ His theory was that the FARC would be able to retreat into this safe haven without threat of violence from the government so that negotiations would not be derailed by bloodshed. However, the FARC instead used the safe haven as a staging base to expand their influence and violence into the rest of Colombia. By the start of the 21st Century, the people of Colombia realized that Pastrana's plan had failed and that a new leader with a better strategy was needed.

As the Colombian security situation continued to deteriorate, the international community, and particularly the United States, became increasingly concerned that Colombia would become a failed state and export violence and lawlessness to the region. As a result, the U.S. Congress passed into law in 2000 a bill known as Plan

Colombia which would help to build the partnership capacity of Colombia by providing money, resources and training. However, there was great concern in the U.S. Congress that Colombia would become America's new Vietnam and therefore, strict measures were put into law that limited U.S. military presence in Colombia to less than 800.¹⁰ In addition, these forces were limited to non-combat roles as advisors and trainers.

It is important to note that the U.S. assistance provided by Plan Colombia was requested by the government of Colombia and was part of an overall COIN strategy originally developed by President Pastrana's government and later modified by his successor, President Uribe, in conjunction with the United States. This is a very important point as it was not necessary for the United States to get buy-in from Colombia for the COIN strategy as it was Colombia's strategy in the first place.

When President Alvaro Uribe took office in 2002 with the mandate to restore security "Colombia was the murder and kidnap capital of the world, the source of nearly all global cocaine, and an economic weakling."¹¹ "The FARC was at its strongest since it took up arms in the 1960s. It had as many as 17,000 fighters and posed a serious threat to the state. Hundreds of rebels at a time launched brazen attacks on military bases."¹²

President Uribe implemented his Democratic Security plan shortly after taking over as president. It was not only a whole of government but a whole of society COIN campaign to counter the FARC and other violent organizations. This plan successfully leveraged the U.S. contributions provided by Plan Colombia and produced dramatic positive results. By 2007, kidnappings which had peaked in 2000 at 3,572 had been reduced to 521.¹³ The city of Medellin, the former murder capital of the world, had less per capita murders than Baltimore or Washington, DC and this was indicative of what

was happening in the rest of Colombia.¹⁴ Today, security is vastly better than a decade ago and has helped attract record levels of investment.¹⁵ The FARC is currently at the peace table with the Colombian government and by all accounts, President Uribe's Democratic Security plan coupled with the assistance provided by the United States through Plan Colombia has been a resounding success. In fact, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commented in 2010 a month after President Uribe left office that she knew that Plan Colombia was controversial and had mistakes and problems but "it worked; we need to figure out what are the equivalents for Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean."¹⁶ Probably the most convincing evidence that this plan was a success is the fact that the Colombian people know that it is. To this day, President Uribe is revered by millions throughout the country from the rural farmer to the urban elite for his successful COIN campaign.¹⁷

Plan Colombia has not only benefitted Colombia but has also benefitted the United States at a relatively low cost. When President Uribe took office in 2002, Colombia was on the verge of becoming a failed state.¹⁸ Today, Colombia is a model of political and economic stability in the region. In addition, it is a close ally of the United States and has recently concluded a bilateral free trade agreement. The success of Plan Colombia has also had a very positive effect on the image of the United States in the region. All of this success came at the modest price of slightly more than 8 billion dollars contributed by the United States.¹⁹ When compared to the over 800 billion dollars spent in Iraq, it sure looks like a bargain.²⁰

Now it is time to look at the United States' contributions, and specifically the U.S. military's contributions, to the Colombian COIN campaign. As previously mentioned,

Plan Colombia is the vehicle which the United States used and still uses to assist the Colombians in their counterinsurgency. It is not an overarching COIN strategy but rather a plan to supplement the Colombian COIN strategy. It is essentially a plan to build the partnership capacity of Colombia. It assists the Colombians by filling in the gaps in their capabilities and allows them to apply their resources to other parts of the COIN campaign.

The United States military helped the Colombians in three main areas. It provided mobility assets in the form of helicopters. It provided training in counterinsurgency, human rights and military professionalism. Finally, it provided intelligence, primarily from intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) gathering platforms.

Mobility is a key aspect in fighting a counterinsurgency.²¹ The counterinsurgent forces must provide security for the entire country, while the insurgents can pick and choose where they will strike. Therefore, the counterinsurgent forces cannot concentrate at anyone area but must be able to rapidly move forces to counter and react to insurgent operations. In addition, offensive strikes against insurgents are frequently based on intelligence that pinpoints the insurgents' location. This intelligence is frequently fleeting and if not acted upon quickly often results in the movement of the insurgents prior to engagement. Finally, insurgents tend to operate in inhospitable environments that are difficult to reach such as the jungle or mountains. Even if the insurgent location can be reached, if the method of arrival is slow it usually can be monitored well in advance by the insurgents and allow them to escape or set up an ambush.

Helicopters can provide the mobility to arrive quickly in hard to reach locations. It provides the counterinsurgents with the means to concentrate forces and act upon intelligence in an effective manner. Plan Colombia provided the Colombians with over 130 U.S.-funded helicopters that dramatically improved the mobility capabilities of the Colombian military and police.²² This increase in air mobility capability has been described by the Colombian Defense ministry as one of the key outcomes of Plan Colombia.²³

The second main area in which the United States military assisted Colombia was by providing training. This training was quite varied, but concentrated in the areas that benefitted the Colombian security forces the most. The principal areas of training included counterinsurgency, human rights and professionalism. A former Colombian Ministry of Defense (MOD) official stated, “U.S. military assistance was critical-not as he put it for the little money – but for the ‘lots of knowledge’ shared by American personnel when addressing Colombian problems.”²⁴

Joint Publication (JP) 3-24 Counterinsurgency Operations states that special operations forces (SOF) are vital to conduct a successful COIN campaign.²⁵ “Prior to 2004, the Colombian military did not have the capability to conduct joint Special Forces operations.”²⁶ With the assistance of the United States, the Colombian military has developed a world class special operations force. In fact, the former J-3 for U.S. Special Operations Command South stated that he could interchange Colombian SOF with U.S. SOF without any degradation of capability.²⁷

Of all the training provided to the Colombian security forces, human rights training probably received the most emphasis.²⁸ The Colombian military had a long

history of violating the human rights of the Colombian populace. The human rights training and the emphasis it received from senior leaders, both Colombian and American, was critical in improving the relationship between the Colombian population and the Colombian security forces.²⁹

The third main area in which the United States focused its training in Colombia was military professionalism. Corruption in Colombia's security forces had become critical by the start of the 21st century. Insurgents flooded with drug money were able to infiltrate all levels of Colombian society to include the military and police. Operations against these insurgents had become increasingly ineffective largely due to intelligence leaks. It was absolutely vital that the security forces regained the respect of their population and obtain the effectiveness necessary to conduct a COIN campaign. Certainly U.S. training in professionalism was valuable but even more important was association with the U.S. military. Senior Colombian military leaders and MOD officials both cited the value of interacting with the U.S. military as very important to the professionalization of the Colombian military.³⁰ These ties with the U.S. military increased morale and helped the Colombian military regain public confidence and demonstrate its professional competence.³¹

Today, the Colombian military has dramatically improved their capability and has become a professional force that is respected by the Colombian population. Many of the regional countries send their military forces to training in Colombia. In fact, the United States sponsors much of this training and has even started sending U.S. forces.³² They train not only in counterinsurgency but in professional courses such as those taught at the International Noncommissioned Officer Academy in Bogota Colombia.³³

Intelligence gathering, especially in ISR gathering platforms, was another key area in which the United States assisted Colombia. Although human intelligence (HUMINT) plays a vital role in any counterinsurgency, the Colombians were in a much better position than the United States to gather this type of intelligence. However, they did lack ISR capability, which is a strong suit for the United States. Therefore, it fit perfectly that the United States would provide ISR gathered intelligence and the Colombians would provide the HUMINT.

Operation Jaque in 2008 gives a perfect example of how far the Colombian military had advanced since the beginning of Plan Colombia. This rescue operation was one of the most audacious and successful operations ever carried out in Colombian military history.³⁴ The operation rescued 15 high-profile hostages from the FARC; many of whom had been held for eight years. The hostages included a Colombian Presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt, and three American contractors. The Colombians had located the hostages months prior to the rescue operation partially with the assistance of U.S. ISR assets.³⁵ They had planned a joint SOF operation using HUMINT assets that had penetrated the FARC years in advance. These HUMINT assets convinced the FARC jailers that their commander required the movement of the hostages by helicopter to another location. Helicopter assets were painted to look like Venezuelan counterparts, which had moved FARC prisoners previously. The helicopters landed in a pre-coordinated location with unarmed Colombian military imitating medics, aircrew and a reporter. The hostages were handcuffed and loaded onto the helicopter along with two insurgents. Once airborne, the insurgents were

overpowered and the hostages were taken to safety. In the event of a failure of the primary plan, 39 helicopters and 2,000 Colombian troops were on alert.

Although the United States provided over 8 billion dollars to the Colombian COIN campaign, the Colombians did all the heavy lifting.³⁶ Between 2000 to 2009, the Colombian government tripled their defense budget to 12 billion dollars and provided the overarching strategy to conduct this campaign.³⁷ This was their war and they wanted to keep it that way.³⁸ By restricting the U.S. military to 800 uniformed personnel in-country, Plan Colombia ensured that the United States remained in a support role.³⁹

President Uribe was very aware of the dangers of the conflict becoming “America’s War.”⁴⁰ He was concerned that the Colombian people, government and particularly security forces became and remained engaged and knew that this was their war to win. To this end, he levied a war tax that particularly reached into the pocketbooks of the wealthy Colombians and tied them to the COIN campaign like never before.⁴¹ To engage the poor, he expanded security to previously ungoverned regions and established social programs throughout the country that intricately linked the masses with the success of the COIN campaign as well. For the Colombian military and government, President Uribe never let them think for a minute that this was “America’s War.” He held his military commanders and government leaders responsible for success or failure and this not only got results but it created pride and increased morale.⁴²

President Uribe’s plan to keep Colombia engaged in the counterinsurgency was hugely successful. If you ask the vast majority of Colombians and particularly their military about the success of the COIN campaign, they will answer with great pride

about all their accomplishments. They will usually acknowledge that they received very valuable assistance from the United States but this was their war and their success.

Besides engaging the Colombian people, President Uribe knew that he needed to gain legitimacy for his government. JP 3-24 says that legitimacy is the main objective of a counterinsurgency.⁴³ A legitimate government needs to provide an environment where all of its citizens have the capability to obtain the basic necessities of life at a minimum and give hope for improvement in the future. In order to accomplish this, the government must first establish security to create an environment where there is opportunity for all to work unmolested from insurgents or criminals. To do this President Uribe dramatically increased the Colombian military and the police from 279,000 in 2000 to 415,000 in 2007.⁴⁴ However, he didn't send these forces to the many ungoverned and lawless areas of the country until the government was prepared to hold the territory and provide social services. In this way, he managed to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Colombian people.

As the Colombian military and police began to provide security without corruption, they too began to gain legitimacy with the Colombian people. As previously mentioned, the small U.S. military presence not only improved the Colombian military's capabilities and professionalism but also directly contributed to an increase in public confidence.⁴⁵

In contrast, the danger of having U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in Colombia very likely would have damaged the legitimacy of the Colombian government and military. In Vietnam one of the main detractors from the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government was the presence of U.S. "Boots on the Ground."⁴⁶ The Viet Cong were

able to play upon the suspicions of the local population about the Americans role in the war to arouse fear of foreign exploitation. In addition, if the government is not capable of providing security for its own country without a foreign military presence, is it really a legitimate government? Furthermore, if a government needs foreign troops to maintain security, how long will those foreign troops be available and what happens after they leave? Will the government be able to continue to provide security and a stable environment or will those who supported the government be punished by the insurgents once the foreign troops leave? If foreign troops are needed, what does that say about the capability and legitimacy of the HN security forces?

As can be induced from these questions, U.S. "Boots on the Ground" can be very problematic for the legitimacy of a HN government and her military. On the other hand, as in the case of Colombia, a small contingent of U.S. troops to train and advise significantly increased the capability of the Colombian forces and actually contributed to a sense of legitimacy. This was all accomplished without arousing fears of foreign exploitation.

Another advantage of the small U.S. military footprint and moderate BPC program in Colombia was that it never significantly piqued the interest of the American public. Most people in the U.S. do not know what Plan Colombia is nor know much about the Colombian insurgency. This has the effect of allowing the U.S. politicians more latitude in handling Plan Colombia without concerns over getting reelected. In particular, there is not tremendous pressure to withdraw from Colombia before the conditions are right.

By definition, the successful conclusion of a COIN campaign is conditions based not based on an arbitrary timeline.⁴⁷ Any limits set on its duration other than success, necessarily contribute to its unsuccessful conclusion. Furthermore, involvement in a counterinsurgency is likely to be long and protracted.⁴⁸ JP 3-24 tells us that, “Counterinsurgents should prepare for a long-term commitment.”⁴⁹

One of the lessons learned from the U.S. Army’s study on the Colombian insurgency was that, “Smaller is better: A small footprint, limited resources, low profile, and some successes increase the likelihood for a long-term US involvement.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, Vietnam gives us an excellent example of what is likely to occur in a counterinsurgency if the U.S. has a large footprint with large amounts of resources, in other words, “Boots on the Ground.” After the Tet offensive of 1968, the U.S. had decisively and dramatically decimated both the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. However, due to U.S. public dismay over the large scale bloodshed during this offensive, the war was lost in the minds of the American public. This not only led to the eventual announcement that the U.S. would pull out but it led the insurgents and North Vietnamese to take heart and adjust their strategy to wait until the U.S. left. Although, the Tet offensive was a tactical disaster for the insurgents it is considered the watershed event that turned the tide of the war in the insurgents favor due to the influence of U.S. public opinion.⁵¹

The U.S. experience in Colombia since the inception of Plan Colombia shows the effects of providing small quantities of troops with moderate quantities of resources to build the partnership capacity of a nation involved in a messy insurgency. BPC provided Colombia the assistance it needed to fill in the gaps in capability while not detracting

from the Colombian's own sense of responsibility to shoulder the burden of winning the counterinsurgency. It did just enough to enhance the legitimacy of the Colombian military and its government without providing the insurgents a rally cry against foreign military intervention. The small footprint of the U.S. military also kept the attention of the U.S. public to a minimum which allowed the politicians to be more concerned about success than reelection.

Iraqi Counterinsurgency

The United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) on March 20, 2003 and rapidly toppled Saddam Hussein's regime. "The immediate goal, as stated by the George W. Bush Administration, was to remove Saddam Hussein's regime, including destroying its ability to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or to make them available to terrorists. The broad, longer-term objective included helping Iraqis build 'a new Iraq that is prosperous and free.'"⁵² On May 1, 2003, President Bush declared an end to major combat operations.

The U.S. troops were initially greeted as liberators.⁵³ However, within six months an insurgency had developed and there was open hostility against the "occupiers who seemed to have made life worse."⁵⁴ The conditions that spawned this insurgency were at least partially caused by the United States. Presidential envoy L. Paul Bremer III "had erred mightily in disbanding the Iraqi security forces and pursuing his policy of "de-Ba'athification."⁵⁵ Without Iraqi security forces or government officials to provide security and essential services, the job mainly fell to the U.S. troops on the ground. With insufficient numbers to tackle this problem and without proper prior planning and training, the U.S. military was unable to provide security or essential services to the Iraqi population's satisfaction.⁵⁶

This situation was exacerbated by a rush to fill the power vacuum created by the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime. Ethnic, religious and tribal powers all vied for power. In addition, Iran and Al Qaeda took advantage of the environment to enhance their influence in Iraq. By 2006, the violence had reached a climax with over 29,000 Iraqi deaths.⁵⁷

The United States responded in 2007 by announcing a new strategy which included a surge of U.S. troops to Iraq which brought the total number to a peak of 168,000.⁵⁸ General David Petraeus led the surge and by most accounts achieved remarkable success in lowering the level of violence.⁵⁹ However, by the end of the surge in 2008, the levels of violence had still only been reduced to the levels at the start of 2006 which were much higher than in 2004.⁶⁰

As Iraqi security forces gained in numbers and capability, the United States role in the counterinsurgency was gradually reduced. Mounting political pressure both within the United States and Iraq led to the departure of U.S. troops in December of 2011.⁶¹

The Iraqi conflict cost the United States the lives of over 4,000 U.S. troops and over 30,000 wounded.⁶² In addition, the United States spent over 800 billion dollars in direct costs with indirect costs likely to drive the price tag much higher.⁶³ This spending was a direct contributor to the current U.S. financial crisis.⁶⁴

On top of this, the prestige of the United States took a pummeling in the international arena. After the rapid and decisive overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the United States was riding a wave of respect in the international community. This was highlighted by the sudden shift in 2003 of Libya's dictator, Omar Khadafi, in which he decided to hand over his WMD and improve his relationship with the United States. As

the United States became mired in a counterinsurgency, U.S. influence around the world was dramatically decreased.

These costs beg the question of whether the results from OIF were worth the sacrifices. The goal of overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime was certainly accomplished. However, is Iraq a stabilizing force in the region? Is democracy taking hold? Is Iraq a new strategic ally of the United States? It may be too early to tell for sure but from all indicators the answer to all these questions is "No."

Iraq is still plagued by corruption and violence is on the rebound.⁶⁵ Al Qaeda this past year has regained a strong foothold due to the Iraqi government's release of many prisoners previously held by the United States.⁶⁶ The Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki is increasingly demonstrating his close ties to Iran. A key example of this is the recent release of a commander of the Iranian supported terrorist group, Hezbollah, despite promises to the United States that they would not do so.⁶⁷ A Freedom House survey of democracy around the world placed Iraq in the 'Not Free' category and gave them the same rating as Iran in "civil liberties."⁶⁸

In addition to the troubling news about democracy and stability in Iraq, the hard earned Iraqi freedom, paid for with American blood, has not purchased a strategic ally or even a friend. The United States has almost no influence in Iraqi policy.⁶⁹ Prime Minister Maliki is the only Arab leader who has supported Syrian President Assad despite U.S. efforts to the contrary.⁷⁰ Iraq's representative to the Arab League recently said that they should use oil as a weapon against the United States.⁷¹ According to Anthony Cordesman, a national-security analyst at the bipartisan Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, "the war's cost in dollars and lives can't be

justified 'by saying that we have a strong partner or a meaningful strategic relationship' with Iraq."⁷² United States Senator John McCain said, "It's a very sad situation, in my view, particularly in light of the sacrifice of so much American blood and treasure."⁷³

As previously mentioned, the immense costs in both dollars and lives of U.S. involvement in the Iraqi counterinsurgency dwarf the costs of U.S. involvement in the Colombian counterinsurgency. Despite these huge sacrifices, the results of the Colombian counterinsurgency have been much better than those of the Iraqi counterinsurgency.

Although the Iraqi counterinsurgency is very different than the Colombian counterinsurgency and the reasons for putting or not putting "Boots on the Ground" are not comparable, the effects of having or not having "Boots on the Ground" can be compared. Therefore, as this paper has already looked at the Colombian conflict without U.S. "Boots on the Ground," it will now look at the effects of having "Boots on the Ground" in Iraq.

The main benefit of having U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in Iraq was that it provided an immediate force-in-being to project power and provide security. After the U.S. disbanded the Iraqi security forces, there was no one else to fill this void. The U.S. military provided mobility, firepower and unmatched ISR to name just a few capabilities. By all accounts, the U.S. military was and is a first rate military trained to the best standards as it had just proven in overrunning Saddam Hussein's military. However, instead of filling in the gaps of Iraqi security forces' capabilities, the U.S. military had to fill all the gaps themselves.

This created multiple problems for the U.S. military. First, it lacked sufficient numbers to provide security for all of Iraq. Second, although strong in ISR, HUMINT is usually more important in a counterinsurgency. As previously mentioned, HUMINT usually is better obtained by HN troops as they understand the environment and culture and can blend in with the insurgents. Third, a lack of sufficient numbers coupled with a lack of local knowledge led to an overreliance on firepower.

COIN operations place a premium on security. The security has to be enduring and not momentary. Therefore, a COIN campaign requires large amounts of security forces to secure and then hold a location to keep it safe from the influence of insurgents. The problem with using the U.S. military as a primary COIN force is that in a country of significant size and population it requires troop strengths in excess of what the U.S. military can provide without dramatic expansion. Colombia with a population of 46 million, about twice the size of Iraq, had to expand their security forces to 415,000 to get the job done.⁷⁴ Iraq with a population of 32 million would still require significantly more troops than the U.S. ever deployed. At the peak during the surge of 2007-2008, U.S. troop strength only reached 168,000.⁷⁵ Even with numbers significantly below the numbers used in Colombia, the U.S. military was stretched very thin over the last ten plus years.

The U.S. military used SIGINT to great effect during Iraq. However, they quickly discovered that SIGINT without HUMINT has limitations. Insurgents hiding among an urban population diminish many of the benefits of SIGINT capabilities. In addition, the insurgents learned to counter the SIGINT with their own tactics and procedures. It took

several years to develop sufficient relationships to begin to gain the benefits of HUMINT on a large-scale.

The U.S. military has traditionally relied heavily on firepower. Although extremely effective at the right place and time, it can be used against a military in a counterinsurgency. The Iraqi insurgents used this to good effect. As the American soldiers became frustrated with the insurgents hit and run tactics and hiding among the people, the U.S. soldiers turned to firepower as the answer. Everyone became the enemy and soldiers would respond to sniper fire with barrages of automatic weapons fire. This resulted in “too many bullets fired indiscriminately into inhabited areas causing unnecessary civilian casualties.”⁷⁶ The mounting civilian casualties angered the local population and increased support for the insurgents.

The three problems just discussed were all caused by the almost total lack of Iraqi security forces at the beginning of the insurgency. Therefore, one might determine that U.S. “Boots on the Ground” if supplemented with HN forces would work effectively in a counterinsurgency. In other words, a HN security force could fill in the gaps of U.S. capabilities to make a good COIN force. However, there are some other issues that occur with “Boots on the Ground” that can significantly hinder a COIN campaign.

As already discussed, the engagement of the HN government and people in a counterinsurgency is a key to winning. In Iraq this was a big problem. The bipartisan congressional commission, The Iraq Study Group, released a report in 2006 that said, “Iraqis have not been convinced that they must take responsibility for their own future.”⁷⁷ The commission went on to indicate that the presence of an open-ended U.S. troop commitment was causing the Iraqi government to not make the hard calls necessary to

combat the insurgency.⁷⁸ In essence, for many Iraqis this was “America’s War” and both the cost and the blame for lack of progress belonged to the United States. The incentive to become engaged was moderated by the mere presence of large quantities of U.S. troops.

Another detriment to U.S. “Boots on the Ground” in the Iraqi counterinsurgency was the fact that not only did their presence discourage engagement of the population but the U.S. presence became a core grievance of the insurgency. JP 3-24 says that “eventually all foreign armies are seen as interlopers or occupiers.”⁷⁹ It goes on to point out that a mere foreign presence is a potential core grievance that can be manipulated by the insurgents to serve their purpose.⁸⁰ This is exactly what happened in Iraq. A RAND study noted that the only clear goal of the Iraqi insurgency was opposition to the United States and its allies.⁸¹

Although the lack of security and services were the initial core grievances and the proximate cause of the insurgency, the insurgents were able to manipulate resentment and fear into a new core grievance, the presence of U.S. troops. This is highlighted by a March 2008 poll, near the end of General Petraeus’ surge in Iraq which had dramatically reduced the violence. The poll concluded that “42% of Iraqis call attacks on U.S. forces acceptable and that only 4% of Iraqis believe that U.S. forces are responsible for the drop in violence. The poll also found that 61% believed that the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq was actually worsening the security situation.”⁸²

A third issue with U.S. “Boots on the Ground” in Iraq was that it detracted from the legitimacy of the HN security forces. As mentioned previously, legitimacy for the HN government is the main objective of a counterinsurgency.⁸³ Although the poll mentioned

in the previous paragraph indicates most Iraqis thought U.S. troops were making the situation worse, many did begin to respect the U.S. troops after the surge. The new methods employed by General Petraeus of having U.S. troops garrison among the people provided enduring security. This ingratiated the U.S. troops with the people who began to provide more cooperation and intelligence. One U.S. commander said with pride “the American Soldier is the most trusted security force among the local population.”⁸⁴ This begs the question, if the Americans are the most trusted, what does this do to the legitimacy of the HN security forces?

What appears to have happened in Iraq is that a significant portion of the population identified the U.S. troops as a core grievance of the insurgency. However, other Iraqis came to respect them as the most trusted security force in the country to the detriment of HN forces. Either way the HN government loses legitimacy. Either the HN government is associated with a core grievance or they are not as competent or legitimate as the foreign presence.

This paper has pointed out many difficulties with U.S. “Boots on the Ground” in a counterinsurgency. However, probably the biggest detriment to having U.S. “Boots on the Ground” is the influence of U.S. public opinion. All the aforementioned issues with “Boots on the Ground” can potentially be resolved with sufficient amounts of quality troops and proficient leaders if there are sufficient resources, time and will to overcome these obstacles. There are historical examples of successful foreign “Boots on the Ground” in counterinsurgencies. These include the two most studied, the U.S. in the Philippines from 1899-1902 and the British in Malaya from 1948-1960. However, in both cases public opinion did not interfere significantly with the COIN campaign.

In the future, if the United States decides to put “Boots on the Ground” in a counterinsurgency, it needs to plan on staying for the long haul. The respected British counterinsurgent expert, Sir Robert Thompson, said, “Don’t go anywhere unless you plan to stay for 20 years.”⁸⁵ However, the very nature of U.S. democracy coupled with entrenched American values “makes it difficult for the country to sustain a protracted conflict that does not threaten its very existence.”⁸⁶ A political system where the entire House of Representatives and a third of the Senate is up for elections every two years makes sustained support for the often unsavory task of fighting a counterinsurgency very difficult.⁸⁷

Iraq is another example of how U.S. public opinion significantly influenced the COIN campaign. In the initial stages of the COIN campaign, there was great pressure from the Bush administration to train new Iraqi security forces quickly so the U.S. troops could be brought home as soon as possible. Unfortunately this resulted in training that that was quick but substandard.⁸⁸ This was highlighted by the poor performance of Iraqi troops in the first battle of Fallujah.⁸⁹ Shortly afterwards, the training program was revamped.⁹⁰

An even more vivid example of the influence of U.S. public opinion was the U.S. Congressional elections of 2006. Although OIF began with an overwhelming approval rating of the American public, by the time of the mid-term Congressional elections Americans were dissatisfied with the war. As a result, the Democrats won both sides of Congress solely based on a platform of withdrawal from Iraq.⁹¹

The final issue of “Boots on the Ground” in Iraq was that U.S. troops lacked local knowledge and culture. The Iraq Study Group stated that “All of our efforts in Iraq,

military and civilian, are handicapped by American's lack of language and cultural understanding."⁹² Thomas Mockaitis went even further to state in most cases the killing of innocent civilians in Iraq was directly attributable to a lack of training, language skills, or cultural understanding.⁹³

This lack of knowledge coupled with the ubiquitous nature of modern media, could make any misstep by even a lowly private a strategic issue. This is commonly called the effect of the strategic private. An excellent example of this from Afghanistan is the burning of Korans by American soldiers in 2012. Even though this order came from above, local troops would certainly have known that burning a Koran was not acceptable. In addition, since it was U.S. troops, foreigners, that had burned the books, it made it easier for the insurgents to play upon the fears and cultural sensitivities of the local population.

Recommendations and Conclusion

U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in a foreign counterinsurgency should be avoided if at all possible. Building Partnership Capacity is a much better option that yields most the benefits of U.S. "Boots on the Ground" without all the disadvantages.

The position of the United States as a globally engaged superpower almost guarantees that it will be involved in conflict around the world. As the United States currently has no peer and very few near peer competitors in the military arena, it is likely that future adversaries will resort to terrorism or insurgency.

The U.S. involvement in the Colombian counterinsurgency from 2002 to the present demonstrates how building partnership capacity can be a very successful tool in combating an insurgency. The United States commitment of less than 800 troops and slightly more than 8 billion dollars has had dramatic positive results.⁹⁴ Colombia is a

strong and stable country in the region with strong ties to the United States both politically and economically.

On the other hand, the U.S. involvement in the Iraqi counterinsurgency has not produced very good results for the United States or the region. Iraq has a very fragile government which is strongly influenced by Iran. In addition, the United States, despite having spent over 800 billion dollars and the lives of over 4,000 troops with over 40,000 wounded, does not have an ally or even a friend in Iraq.⁹⁵

A comparison of U.S. involvement in these two counterinsurgencies strongly indicates that a policy of building the partnership capacity of a HN ally is much preferred to putting U.S. “Boots on the Ground.” Former Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates, said that it is likely and even a certainty that the United States will need to work “with and through local governments to avoid the next insurgency (or) rescue the next failing state...”⁹⁶

A small U.S. military footprint allows the U.S. military to fill in the gaps in the HN security forces’ capabilities without endangering the legitimacy of the HN government. It also avoids the problem of the counterinsurgency becoming “America’s War.” The HN government and population needs to be engaged. It needs to be their problem and their solution. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, “captured a key to the success in Colombia...when he emphasized the long-term United States support ‘to *your* approach, *your* execution, and obviously *your* results.’”⁹⁷

The large military footprint in the Iraqi counterinsurgency overstretched the U.S. military and left them without the capabilities necessary to successfully conclude the insurgency. The U.S. military presence made it “America’s War” which hurt the

legitimacy of the Iraqi government. In addition, the U.S. military presence became a core grievance of the insurgency. Finally, the influence of U.S. public opinion did not give U.S. politicians the leeway to deal with the conflict based on conditions rather than a timeline.

A veteran from the counterinsurgency in El Salvador concluded, "Contrary to the U.S. Defense Department's usual way of doing things, smaller is better...It is their war and they must win it...We probably cannot deliver victory from outside and if we can, it probably is transitory."⁹⁸

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